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Youth protest in Germany? An analysis based on the results of the Shell Youth Studies

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Youth protest, sometimes accompanied by riots, in a number of European countries over the last few years repeatedly trigger the question whether similar forms of protest can be expected in the near future from young people in Germany as well. While any, often spontaneous eruption of (violent) protest, can never be predicted with certainty, we argue, based on an analysis of the last Shell Youth Studies (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2002, 2006, 2010), that it is rather unlikely to happen in Germany, indeed that if anything this likelihood has decreased over recent years. We identify three explanations for the – compared to a range of other European countries – striking acquiescence of the current young generation in Germany: 1. A range of institutions that keep young Germans in the education system until they finally find employment, 2. a strong culture of pragmatic individualism, and 3. a strong distrust of political parties.

1 High uncertainty, but inclusion in the education system

Since the 1990s, the German labour market has been so competitive that about ten to fifteen percent of the young generation has not had the chance to become permanently integrated into the labour force. They have grown up during periods of global and national economic crises which resulted in relatively high unemployment rates. German youth unemployment rates may seem moderate in comparison to other European countries (e.g., Italy and Spain). However, in comparison to their parents' generation, these young people no longer have a *de facto* guarantee that they would get a job with the transition to adulthood. As a result, fear of unemployment is very high and can be found in all age and status groups.



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Most of young people in Germany are responding to this unpredictable economic opportunity structure by investing heavily in their education. They seem to take it for granted that it is their individual responsibility to devote themselves to achieve an appropriate training record.

The Shell Youth Studies also clearly demonstrate inequalities between different groups of adolescents. Social origin, including immigration background, determines how successful young people are in their school career. While the majority of young people exhibits a high level of personal confidence and optimism and achieves a great deal of educational success, up to 20% of young Germans do not have either the cognitive and social competences, or the complex skills of self-organization necessary to fulfill the demands of the educational system (*Shell Deutschland* 2010, p. 110). Among the young people who experience problems, the majority are young men. Young men with immigration background are especially vulnerable (cf. *Quenzel/Hurrelmann* 2013). Even in this relatively disadvantaged position, they take responsibility for their own failures, believing they had not followed the rules of meritocracy.

Yet it is also important to note that youth unemployment in Germany has always remained roughly at the ten percent mark. An extended 'transitional system', a dual occupational training system, and excessive periods of university studies have meant that the pressure currently apparent for example in Spain has never prevailed in Germany.

While this generation's life prospects are characterized by structural uncertainty, it remains rather optimistic. Nevertheless, the majority of young people feels threatened with regard to the uncertain economic and professional opportunities available to it. At the same time, most young people consciously enjoy the considerable social and cultural freedoms they have and are excited about the wide range of opportunities for action and self-articulation in the areas of media, fashion, music, entertainment, leisure and social interaction. They cheerfully accept the independence with which the 'moratorium' during their present life phase presents them: the social 'state of waiting' in their life course that is postponing the adoption of a 'responsible' adult status which includes having a family and a career. They more or less wait patiently in order to eventually access the desired path to full societal membership: long-term fulltime employment and an independent family (cf. *Hurrelmann/Quenzel* 2013).

Thus, today's German youth are 'children of the meritocracy' who take it that individuals themselves are to a large degree responsible for personal failures or successes. They realize that they will face stiff competition on the labor market; not all will have access to prestigious careers. Yet they stick to their pragmatism even though they know that some of them will be rejected by the labor market – despite the fact that they have undergone much more rigorous educational training, and have achieved higher school and university degrees than their parents and grandparents.

2 Individualism and highly pragmatic attitudes

The three most recent Shell Youth Studies all come to the same conclusion: most of the young people in Germany today have developed a strikingly pragmatic approach in regard to shaping their personal future. Although they consider the present economic and political situation to be critical, they trust that they will be able to cope with the objective chal-

allenges facing them through personal, individual effort. Given this worldview, we have called Germany's present youth generation the 'Pragmatic Generation'.

The dominant value orientation of approximately 80 percent of young Germans can be described as pragmatic and self-assured, as they create a synthesis of the 'old' and the 'new'. There is a renaissance of values of hard work and ambition, strength, influence and security. These are combined with values which foster self-realization: creativity, independence, enjoyment of life and high quality of life. These values are a combination of unabashed materialist and post-materialist orientations, of self-realization mixed with a love of order in a broad sense. These young people accept that hard work and discipline will lead to both material wealth and to enjoyment of life. They employ self-centered and needs-oriented 'ego-tactics'. They are interested in politics, yet are annoyed at the activities of the traditional political parties (cf. *Shell Deutschland*, 2010, p. 129).

This pragmatic generation of young Germans actively explores the opportunities for 'individualization' within the social structures available to it. For the majority, individual attitudes and achievements have become crucial. Sophisticated patterns of biographical self-management encourage these young people to develop high self-efficacy. They enjoy the opportunity to dive into a diverse social life and come to grips with a plurality of cultural worlds.

However, about 20 percent of young people in Germany do not share the pragmatic optimism of the majority. These have not been successful either in school or in their training fields. Like the majority, they wish to bring together strength and quality of life. They similarly long for influential positions, yet have a clear sense that they have neither the performance ability, nor the appropriate social skills to succeed in this endeavor. In these groups, political interest is almost non-existent, and social and civic engagement is limited. Economic insecurity means that these young people have greater reservations with regard to democracy. Though organized political protest is not a part of their lives, they sometimes commit themselves to radical rightwing parties (cf. *Shell Deutschland*, 2010, p. 152).

3 Strong distrust of political parties

A first glance at the results of the Shell Youth Studies seems to suggest that the 'pragmatic generation' is not very interested in politics, and has a deep distrust of party politics and politicians, yet is fairly satisfied with its life situation and the state of society. A second glance, however, discloses a rather innovative path to social and political engagement.

Young people feel alienated from the political system. They regard parties as political 'machines' and worry that they are not tackling the urgent problems related to their future. The impression that they have no influence on the decisions made by politicians leads to a mixture of helplessness and alienation. Young Germans fear that the political system is unaware of crucial social and economic developments. As they turn away from this system, some of them no longer identify with current political structures and parties. This silent protest, although not immediately discernible, presents a growing challenge to the political elite as well as to German democratic civil society. This development reveals a relative complacency amongst young people in a Germany (which, unlike most other

European states, has thus far escaped the world economic and financial crises of the last years relatively unscathed), and a general dissatisfaction with traditional party politics.

In the post-war self-understanding of the Federal Republic of Germany, a strong, politically interested and engaged society of responsible, mature, and informed citizens ('mündige Bürger') provides the cornerstone of the country's character as a stable Western democracy. In public debates, the tremendous long-term decline in political interest amongst young people is thus perceived as being highly problematic.

Against this background, the drop from an all-time high of 57% politically interested young people at the beginning of the 1990's (certainly a reaction to the unexpected unification of the two German states in 1989) to an all-time low of 34% in 2002 can understandably be seen as dramatic (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2002, p. 91). After 2002 there was a certain recovery, as the number of politically interested young people rose to 39% in 2006 and to 40% in 2010 (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2010, p. 130).

There has, however, been a significant development during the most recent period, which is not immediately obvious. Over the years, political interest has remained both stratified and gendered: young males have been and remain more interested in politics than females, and young people from the higher strata of society have been and remain more interested than those from lower strata. Yet a significant change is apparent when one differentiates between age groups. Although it remains true that the level of political interest generally increases with age, the 1% overall increase between 2006 and 2010 actually hides a slight decrease in political interest in the age group generally most interested (from 48% to 47% in the 22-25 year age group) and a significant decrease in the second most interested age group (from 42% to 38% in the 18-21 year age group). In light of this development, it becomes apparent that the slight overall increase is brought about by a significant increase in political interest among the younger age groups, from 15% to 21% in the 12-14 year age group, and from 26% to 33% in the 15-17 year age group (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2010, p. 133).

The growing political interest shown by the younger age groups suggests a possible imminent 'traditional' (re-) politicization of the young generation. However, it must be kept in mind that for the young generation in Germany, social engagement continues to be an involvement in 'non-traditional' forms of politics.

This development must be understood against the background of young people's *Politikverdrossenheit* (political disenchantment), which in fact has always been a *Parteien-* and a *Politikerverdrossenheit* (disenchantment with political parties and politicians). When asked about the level of trust that they hedge for various societal institutions – ranging from the police to labor unions, to large corporations – young people have traditionally replied that political parties deserve their trust the least (only to be outdone by banks in 2010). The party young people persistently identified as being best able to solve the most pressing societal problems has been 'none' (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2010, p. 142).

The traditional question 'Are you interested in politics?' calls forth a response that equates 'politics' with party politics and with distrusted politicians, and this attitude most likely accounts to a large extent for the decreasing interest in politics in general. The Shell Youth Studies indicate that this form of politics is not what many young people would describe when asked to reflect more closely on their definition of politics.

The type of political interest that automatically equates 'politics' with society's visible institutions and organizations (basically: 'what you see in the headlines') is only one aspect of political engagement. The other type is more diffuse, with boundaries that are

much less clear than those provided by institutions and organizations. Yet, through the education system, the peer-group, and even family environments, this type extends much further into the daily lives of young people (cf. *Arnold et al.* 2011; *Pfaff* 2006).

This broader understanding of, and interest in politics becomes apparent when one takes a closer look at young people's willingness to become politically active. Whereas the overall traditional level of political interest has been around 40%, there is now a 77% willingness to become politically active (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2010, p. 143). However, when further differentiating between the types of political activity young people are willing to engage in, becoming active in a political party, or in any other political grouping receives the lowest scores. Yet, activities most removed from traditional forms of (party) political engagement score highest: signing a petition, boycotting the purchase of specific products for political reasons, or participating in protest marches/demonstrations (cf. *Shell Deutschland* 2010, p. 147).

4 Conclusion

Young Germans face many problems on their path towards adulthood. For two decades, they have had extremely unfavorable career prospects. As a result, they have had to reorient their lives to address insecurity and uncertainty. However, they have accepted and faced these challenges with remarkable patience. The dominant mentality of these young people has become one of pragmatic individualism. Their attitudes towards politics are characterized by the feeling that (nor any political party, for that matter) can influence the social and political developments to significant extents. Thus, even though young people might again become more interested in politics and are actually quite willing to participate in a number of political activities, there seems to be little reason why they should take to the streets.

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